

5 genius ways to get your kid to practice a musical instrument—without nagging, yelling, or tears



Hearing your budding musician play a song you recognize or a beautiful piece of music ranks as one of the wondrous moments in parenting. *My kid! A musician!* But to get there takes practice. So how do you get your child to keep at it, week after week, without nagging, threatening, or making anybody cry?

Five big ideas are at the heart of it:

1. Time it right.



Leaving practice to the last minute, a leftover to be crammed in after everything else going on or 15 minutes before you have to leave for the next lesson, doesn't really work. We all know that, right?

"Most kids mean to practice, but they get busy with homework or play, or one TV show leads to another and then suddenly it's bedtime," says [Rachel Condry](#), who teaches clarinet to all ages in Emeryville, California. "They need help with scheduling and remembering *anything*."

For younger kids: Weave practice into their everyday routine, just like snack time and bath time. Pick a time when they'll be most motivated: First thing in the morning? (A surprisingly great time for many.) Right after school? Half an hour before dinner?

For older kids and teens: Try making music practice a kind of stress relief from homework. Maybe they do an hour of math and then practice music before switching to another subject.

Then, when it's time...don't watch the clock! Because here's the thing: It's not about how often or how long your kid practices—really. **You know how you feel when your boss emphasizes "face time" over results? Our kids feel the same way when we emphasize practice time over building skills.**

Texas researchers back that up. When they took a look at the ways practice behaviors influence performance in a [Journal of Research in Music Education](#) study, they found that *how* students practice matters more than how much. The bottom line: Your child will have more fun, learn more, and take more ownership of the work by focusing on certain skills for 10 or 15 minutes than by just going through the motions of playing until a timer

goes off in 30 or 60 minutes. Your child's teacher can help by breaking down lessons into specific tasks to work on at home.

2. Watch how you talk about it.

Some teachers don't even like the p-word—so vague and boring! They suggest asking, "What are you playing today?" or "Have you played yet today?" You might be surprised by the difference a few words make.

While your kid is playing, they add, bite your tongue. Avoid harping on all the inevitable mistakes you'll hear. "I'm seeing an uptick in students at a young age being extremely hard on themselves," Condry says. "They have a hard time not being correct all the time—to the point where some kids won't even answer my questions because they're so afraid of being wrong. But trying and failing is part of the process."

In fact, in that Texas study, the best students made just as many mistakes as the others when learning new music. The difference: Instead of trying to avoid mistakes, their goal was to develop skills to learn from them.

Some ways to build this attitude, say Condry and others:

- **When kids complain, saying, "I can't do it," say: "You can't do it yet."** What child-development experts call the "[growth mindset](#)" works in music too.
- **Tell them that what they might think of as hard is simply unfamiliar.** Trying a lot makes it more familiar.
- **Encourage them to slow it down.** That's one of the tactics the Texas study kids used. They repeated the parts where they made mistakes over and over, never stopping but slowing during the tough parts until they could master them.
- **Suggest that they play a difficult passage two or three different ways.** For example, if there are eight notes that keep tripping your kid up, have her break it into three-note sections, Condry suggests. Play the passage starting from the first note, she says, then again starting from the second note, and then from the third note. "By taking it apart this way, the brain and body are able to put it together better," she adds.

3. Set the scene.

Who wouldn't want to spend time hanging out in their "practice nest"? That's how Andrea Dow, of [Teach Piano Today](#) in Cowichan Bay, British Columbia, describes the ideal set-up. It's a quiet, welcoming, organized place designated for practicing: No TV, no phone, no pets, no younger siblings coming in and touching the instrument. Ideally it's "close to the action but not in the action," she says—not a basement or bedroom but not the middle of the kitchen, either. Keep the music, stands, pencil and paper, or anything else your child needs in this spot.



Kids gain focus and a sense of the space as their special music zone. (Bonus points for putting flowers, a special pen, or a handwritten encouraging note in view, says Dow.)

For all the benefits of no distractions, it helps some kids to occasionally break their practice monotony by playing somewhere other than their typical spot, says [McKenzie Clawson](#), a teacher of all ages and an adjunct faculty member at Utah State University. “Try the bathroom or outside in good weather,” she says. Even standing on a little step stool or sitting on the floor provides a change of pace to perk up a balky student.

If you’re normally hands-off with practice, try sitting in, suggests Philip Johnston, author of [Practiceopedia: The Music Student’s Illustrated Guide to Practicing](#). If you’re always in the room supervising practice, step out. Not that there’s anything wrong with you. But more, or less, of you might be what your kid needs right now.



4. Add some fun

Johnston points out that video games have specific missions and tasks: You have to catch ten monsters, then level up to another mission. Practice is just...nebulous. Kids respond to the “gamification” of practice because it makes drudgery more like a video game, he says. Some ideas:

- **Try “three tries.”** “Ask your child to play his or her piece, song, or excerpt three times: once terribly, once so-so, and once perfectly,” says McKenzie Clawson. While they’re chuckling over their purposefully bad sound, she says, they’ll actually be paying mental attention to the details of tone, intonation, and posture.
- **Make a show of it.** Some kids get inspired by an occasional audience. Maybe a young Suzuki student would get charged up playing before a line-up of stuffed animals, Clawson says. Or invite Grandma and Grandpa to watch the practice session via Skype.
- **Track and reward.** Some teachers frown on incentives because, ideally, kids should play out of joy or diligence. But...they’re kids. [Brecklyn Ferrin](#), a Suzuki teacher in Kaysville, Utah, asks her students to mark, on a chart in her studio, how many days they played that week. When they hit 30 days, they can choose a prize, or they can save up for a 60-day prize. “Those are cooler,” she says. You can modify this idea at home. She says writing the number down themselves helps them feel more in charge and accountable.

5. Reinforce some key musical lessons outside of actual playing time.

If your child is learning a snippet of *Carmen*, listen to the full opera during dinner (or over several dinners), Condry suggests. If the song of the week is “My Favorite Things,” watch *The Sound of Music* together.



Listen to music—virtually any kind of music, not just the instrument your child is learning—as a family: a concert in a recital hall, free music in the park, a performance by the high school orchestra or band, a family-friendly club, or anywhere live music can be heard.

Hearing great music live does three things, teachers say:

- **It exposes kids to new sounds they might like to learn.**
- **It’s motivating to witness the effect music has on others.**
- **It reinforces the idea that music is one of life’s pleasures.** (And that’s a p-word that infuses practice with positivity.)

These small changes in how practice time works around your house can make everybody happier when that recital or school concert rolls around. You’ll be there feeling proud (and much nicer for having nagged less). And your increasingly accomplished musician will feel proud too—both from seeing that hard work pays off and from hearing those impressive, beautiful sounds she can make all on her own.

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